

Philemon

Bible Commentary 2021

by

Mike Kines

1:1-3

This was a short letter from Paul to Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus. This was a family who hosted a house church and were possibly brought to the Lord Jesus by Paul. Paul described himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Throughout Paul's imprisonment he considered himself a prisoner of Jesus Christ. This was a personal letter from Paul to Philemon.

The purpose of this letter was intercession. Paul interceded on behalf of Onesimus who he met in prison. This letter was not for instruction or rebuke but rather shows us an old saint who interceded on behalf of one of his disciples.

This demonstrated the heart of Jesus and how he intercedes on our behalf. The Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins. He was buried in a tomb. On the third day he rose from the dead. Jesus ascended to his Father in heaven and he lives to this day making intercession for us.

The heart of Jesus is the heart of an intercessor. In this letter we will see that Paul followed the Lord Jesus in interceding for those who were wayward. May the Lord give us compassion and help us intercede for those the Lord puts into our lives.

1:4-7

Paul was not only an apostle but also an intercessor for the church. Paul testified to Philemon and the church in his house that he prayed for them. He made mention of them always in his prayers. He received a report of their love and faith which they had toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints. Love for God goes hand in hand with love of the church. Those who say they love God but hate their brothers are deceived. How can we say we love God if we do not love our neighbor?

The church in Philemon's house was effective in encouraging the saints. They had a testimony of faith and love and encouraged the saints who came to their church. News of house churches spread by letter and word of mouth and it was encouraging to hear of the success of house churches. It brought Paul joy and comfort because of their love and faith.

The words 'faith' and 'love' come up quite a bit in Paul's letters. It would be interesting to do a study of these words, and see how basic these ideas are to every Christian, local church, and the entire body of Christ.

We have an example of praying for the church. Remember to pray for the church and brothers and sisters around the world. Many Christians suffer for their faith in Christ. Paul was in prison for preaching the gospel and many Christians are still suffering for their faith in Christ.

Remember to pray for the church. Pray for revival. Pray people will be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. Pray we may work while we have the light. Night is coming when no one will be able to work. Stay in the word and stay in prayer, too.

1:8-11

Paul interceded for Onesimus who was his son in the faith. Paul had a relationship with Philemon, and he also had a relationship with Onesimus. I assume that Paul brought both of them to Jesus. Philemon hosted a house church so he was a man of some means. Paul met Onesimus in prison and so I assume Onesimus was a run away slave from Philemon.

Onesimus once served Philemon but probably ran away. He had a divine appointment with Paul in prison. Paul brought Onesimus to faith in Christ just as he did with Philemon. I wonder what Paul felt when he realized Onesimus was a former slave of Philemon? This would put him in the moral dilemma of either keeping Onesimus as a helper or sending him back to Philemon. No doubt Paul was bound to do the right thing and sent Onesimus back to Philemon.

Something from the Lord happened in this situation with Onesimus and Philemon. Love intervened. Paul interceded with Philemon for Onesimus on the basis of love. This is true spiritual authority Paul showed here. He was not lording it over Philemon or commanding him but instead he appealed to Philemon on the basis of love. In reality this is how all God's kingdom operates. Everything outside of love in ministry or church only amounts to dead religion. Only the motive of love will bring successful intercession and real spiritual life to people.

People know the difference between spiritual authority based on God's love and carnal authority based on the world system. One brings spiritual life, and the other oppression and spiritual death.

Once again Paul identified himself as a prisoner. He completely identified with Onesimus. Paul put himself on the same level as Onesimus even though he was an apostle. Despite the fact he had every right to demand Philemon do the right thing he appealed to him. He humbled himself and appealed to him on the basis of love. This is true Christianity. There was no deceitfulness, no guile, no manipulation, no bullying, and no intimidation. There was a plain man of God interceding on behalf of a brother in Christ.

The Lord Jesus interceded for us. He fully identified himself with us in our humanity so he could intercede on our behalf with God the Father. Jesus is our great high priest and intercessor who lives forever. Every Christian should have this same attitude. A heart of compassion. A heart of love. A heart of humility.

Christ died for our sins. He was buried. He rose again on the third day. He ascended to heaven and is at the right hand of God the Father. He lives forever to make intercession for us. He will return again to this earth and establish his kingdom over all the nations. When all is complete we will be with God forever in the New Jerusalem. This is my purpose and my goal: to be with the Lord forever.

1:12-16

Paul sent Onesimus with this letter to return to Philemon. Philemon was his former master. So Onesimus went back to his previous master with a letter in his hand from the apostle Paul. I bet this was a shock to Philemon. Can you imagine the awe that struck Philemon when he realized the divine leading of God who brought Onesimus to Paul? Then Paul sent Onesimus back to him. This letter must have become a family heirloom and saved in a special place. Of course it was! We still have a copy of this letter today.

Paul said he would have kept Onesimus with him because he was changed. That is what happens when people become a Christian. They change. They are no longer good for nothing. They no longer run away from problems. Instead, they take responsibility. They become fruitful and productive. This was what happened to Onesimus. He became so useful Paul wanted to keep him around but knew he had to send him back to Philemon.

It seems Paul held the thought that Philemon might send Onesimus back to help him. We see the heart of Paul when he said, *"perhaps he departed for a season that thou shouldest receive him for ever"*. This reminds me of the parable Jesus taught of the prodigal son. The wayward son left for a season but when he came back he was more than just a son. He was now a humble and wise son, a useful son. He was a son who was humble and repentant. This is the way Onesimus went back to Philemon: in humility, in repentance, and not just as a slave. Onesimus had changed his status. Now he was a Christian which made him a brother of Philemon.

Within the church there is no master or slave. There is no longer any man exalting himself over another. We all stand on equal ground at the foot of Calvary.

Paul said Onesimus was like a son to him and he encouraged Philemon to receive Onesimus as a son. Perhaps Paul remembered the parable Jesus taught about the prodigal son. The prodigal said he was only worthy to be a servant in his father's house but the Father called him his son.

Oh, to hear the Lord say, "You belong to me". We are no longer just servants but we are his friends. We are the brothers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Hallelujah, I truly do have a brother who sticks closer than anyone. The brothers in this world fail but Christ never fails us. He died for us. He was buried and he rose again on the third day. We can put all of our trust and faith in the Lord Jesus.

1:17-25

Paul asked that Philemon would put all of the debts Onesimus owed on Paul himself. This was another reflection of the finished and completed work of Christ. This is what the Lord Jesus did for us. Everything we owed justice and God's wrath the Lord Jesus took on himself. He took our debt on himself and paid for all our debt by dying on the cross. He died on the cross so that we could be forgiven the debt of our sin.

Paul was living out the completed work of Christ. Anyone who is truly in Christ will display the same kind of behavior. Anyone who is in Christ will speak, and live, and have the same attitude that Jesus had. The Lord Jesus laid down his life so that we could live. Christians do the same thing. They give up their lives so others may come to the saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's final request was that they would make room for him in their house. He asked them to pray for him that he would be released from prison and would have an opportunity to come and stay with them. Paul not only preached the gospel but he gave his life to people. We cannot separate the gospel from our lives. If others will hear and believe they must also see the gospel in the lives of those who preach the gospel. The people Paul brought to the knowledge of Jesus Christ saw in his life something so radical they believed his message. Paul lived what he preached.

May the Lord give us a heart to intercede and lay down our lives so others may also find salvation in Jesus.

Christ died for our sins. He was buried. He rose again on the third day. This was witnessed by many people, and the testimony of these historical facts were passed down to us. May the Lord open our eyes so we may perceive the gift of eternal life he extends to us today.

Mike Kines
June 1, 2021